

The legends of the deaths of Pentheus and Lycurgus, two kings who are said to have been torn to pieces, the one by Bacchanals, the other by horses, for their opposition to the rites of Dionysus, may be, as I have already suggested, distorted reminiscences of a custom of sacrificing divine kings in the character of Dionysus and of dispersing the fragments of their broken bodies over the fields for the purpose of fertilising them. It is probably no mere coincidence that Dionysus himself is said to have been torn in pieces at Thebes, the very place where according to legend the same fate befell king Pentheus at the hands of the frenzied votaries of the vine-god. 11

However, a tradition of human sacrifice may sometimes have been a mere misinterpretation of a sacrificial ritual in which an animal victim was treated as a human being. For example, at Tenedos the new-born calf sacrificed to Dionysus was shod in buskins, and the mother cow was tended like a woman in child-bed. At Rome a shegoat was sacrificed to Vediovis as if it were a human victim. Yet on the other hand it is equally possible, and perhaps more probable, that these curious rites were themselves mitigations of an older and ruder custom of sacrificing human beings, and that the later pretence of treating the sacrificial victims as if they were human beings was merely part of a pious and merciful fraud, which palmed off on the deity less precious victims than living men and women. This interpretation is supported by many undoubted cases in which animals have been substituted for human victims. 12

Chapter 44. Demeter and Persephone.

DIONYSUS was not the only Greek deity whose tragic story and ritual appear to reflect the decay and revival of vegetation. In another form and with a different application the old tale reappears in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Substantially their myth is identical with the Syrian one of Aphrodite (Astarte) and Adonis, the Phrygian one of Cybele and Attis, and the Egyptian one of Isis and Osiris. In the Greek fable, as in its Asiatic and Egyptian counterparts, a goddess mourns the loss of a loved one, who personifies the vegetation, more especially the corn, which dies in winter to revive in spring; only whereas the Oriental imagination figured the loved and lost one as a dead lover or a dead husband lamented by his leman or his wife, Greek fancy embodied the same idea in the tenderer and purer form of a dead daughter bewailed by her sorrowing mother. 1

The oldest literary document which narrates the myth of Demeter and Persephone is the beautiful Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which critics assign to the seventh century before our era. The object of the poem is to explain the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries, and the complete silence of the poet as to Athens and the Athenians, who in after ages took conspicuous part in the festival, renders it probable that the hymn was composed in the far off time when Eleusis was still a petty independent state, and before the stately procession of the Mysteries had begun to defile, in bright September days, over the low chain of barren rocky hills which divides the flat Eleusinian cornland from the more spacious olive-clad expanse of the Athenian plain. Be that as it may, the hymn reveals to us the conception which the writer entertained of the character and functions of the two goddesses; their natural shapes stand out sharply enough under the thin veil of poetical imagery. The youthful Persephone, so runs the tale, was gathering roses and lilies, crocuses and violets, hyacinths and narcissuses in a lush meadow, when the earth gaped and Pluto, lord of the Dead, issuing from the abyss carried her off on his golden car to be his bride and queen in the gloomy subterranean world. Her sorrowing mother Demeter, with her yellow tresses veiled in a dark mourning mantle, sought her over land and sea, and learning from the Sun her daughter's fate she withdrew in high dudgeon from the gods and took up her abode at Eleusis, where she presented herself to the king's daughters

in the guise of an old woman, sitting sadly under the shadow of an olive tree beside the Maiden's Well, to which the damsels had come to draw water in bronze pitchers for their father's house. In her wrath at her bereavement the goddess suffered not the seed to grow in the earth but kept it hidden under ground, and she vowed that never would she set foot on Olympus and never would she let the corn sprout till her lost daughter should be restored to her. Vainly the oxen dragged the ploughs to and fro in the fields; vainly the sower dropped the barley seed in the brown furrows; nothing came up from the parched and crumbling soil. Even the Rarian plain near Eleusis, which was wont to wave with yellow harvests, lay bare and fallow. Mankind would have perished of hunger and the gods would have been robbed of the sacrifices which were their due, if Zeus in alarm had not commanded Pluto to disgorge his prey, to restore his bride Persephone to her mother Demeter. The grim lord of the Dead smiled and obeyed, but before he sent back his queen to the upper air on a golden car, he gave her the seed of a pomegranate to eat, which ensured that she would return to him. But Zeus stipulated that henceforth Persephone should spend two thirds of every year with her mother and the gods in the upper world and one third of the year with her husband in the nether world, from which she was to return year by year when the earth was gay with spring flowers. Gladly the daughter then returned to the sunshine, gladly her mother received her and fell upon her neck; and in her joy at recovering the lost one Demeter made the corn to sprout from the clods of the ploughed fields and all the broad earth to be heavy with leaves and blossoms. And straightway she went and showed this happy sight to the princes of Eleusis, to Triptolemus, Eumolpus, Diocles, and to the king Celeus himself, and moreover she revealed to them her sacred rites and mysteries. Blessed, says the poet, is the mortal man who has seen these things, but he who has had no share of them in life will never be happy in death when he has descended into the darkness of the grave. So the two goddesses departed to dwell in bliss with the gods on Olympus; and the bard ends the hymn with a pious prayer to Demeter and Persephone that they would be pleased to grant him a livelihood in return for his song. 2

It has been generally recognised, and indeed it seems scarcely open to doubt, that the main theme which the poet set before himself in composing this hymn was to describe the traditional foundation of the Eleusinian mysteries by the goddess Demeter. The whole poem leads up to the transformation scene in which the bare leafless expanse of the Eleusinian plain is suddenly turned, at the will of the goddess, into a vast sheet of ruddy corn; the beneficent deity takes the princes of Eleusis, shows them what she has done, teaches them her mystic rites, and vanishes with her daughter to heaven. The revelation of the mysteries is the triumphal close of the piece. This conclusion is confirmed by a more minute examination of the poem, which proves that the poet has given, not merely a general account of the foundation of the mysteries, but also in more or less veiled language mythical explanations of the origin of particular rites which we have good reason to believe formed essential features of the festival. Amongst the rites as to which the poet thus drops significant hints are the preliminary fast of the candidates for initiation, the torchlight procession, the all-night vigil, the sitting of the candidates, veiled and in silence, on stools covered with sheepskins, the use of scurrilous language, the breaking of ribald jests, and the solemn communion with the divinity by participation in a draught of barley-water from a holy chalice. 3

But there is yet another and a deeper secret of the mysteries which the author of the poem appears to have divulged under cover of his narrative. He tells us how, as soon as she had transformed the barren brown expanse of the Eleusinian plain into a field of golden grain, she gladdened the eyes of Triptolemus and the other Eleusinian princes by showing them the growing or standing corn. When we compare this part of the story with the statement of a Christian writer of the second century, Hippolytus, that the very heart of the mysteries consisted in showing to the initiated a reaped ear of

corn, we can hardly doubt that the poet of the hymn was well acquainted with this solemn rite, and that he deliberately intended to explain its origin in precisely the same way as he explained other rites of the mysteries, namely by representing Demeter as having set the example of performing the ceremony in her own person. Thus myth and ritual mutually explain and confirm each other. The poet of the seventh century before our era gives us the myth - he could not without sacrilege have revealed the ritual: the Christian father reveals the ritual, and his revelation accords perfectly with the veiled hint of the old poet. On the whole, then, we may, with many modern scholars, confidently accept the statement of the learned Christian father Clement of Alexandria, that the myth of Demeter and Persephone was acted as a sacred drama in the mysteries of Eleusis. 4

But if the myth was acted as a part, perhaps as the principal part, of the most famous and solemn religious rites of ancient Greece, we have still to enquire, What was, after all, stripped of later accretions, the original kernel of the myth which appears to later ages surrounded and transfigured by an aureole of awe and mystery, lit up by some of the most brilliant rays of Grecian literature and art? If we follow the indications given by our oldest literary authority on the subject, the author of the Homeric hymn to Demeter, the riddle is not hard to read; the figures of the two goddesses, the mother and the daughter, resolve themselves into personifications of the corn. At least this appears to be fairly certain for the daughter Persephone. The goddess who spends three or, according to another version of the myth, six months of every year with the dead underground and the remainder of the year with the living above ground; in whose absence the barley seed is hidden in the earth and the fields lie bare and fallow; on whose return in spring to the upper world the corn shoots up from the clods and the earth is heavy with leaves and blossoms - this goddess can surely be nothing else than a mythical embodiment of the vegetation, and particularly of the corn, which is buried under the soil for some months of every winter and comes to life again, as from the grave, in the sprouting cornstalks and the opening flowers and foliage of every spring. No other reasonable and probable explanation of Persephone seems possible. And if the daughter goddess was a personification of the young corn of the present year, may not the mother goddess be a personification of the old corn of last year, which has given birth to the new crops? The only alternative to this view of Demeter would seem to be to suppose that she is a personification of the earth, from whose broad bosom the corn and all other plants spring up, and of which accordingly they may appropriately enough be regarded as the daughters. This view of the original nature of Demeter has indeed been taken by some writers, both ancient and modern, and it is one which can be reasonably maintained. But it appears to have been rejected by the author of the Homeric hymn to Demeter, for he not only distinguishes Demeter from the personified Earth but places the two in the sharpest opposition to each other. He tells us that it was Earth who, in accordance with the will of Zeus and to please Pluto, lured Persephone to her doom by causing the narcissuses to grow which tempted the young goddess to stray far beyond the reach of help in the lush meadow. Thus Demeter of the hymn, far from being identical with the Earth-goddess, must have regarded that divinity as her worst enemy, since it was to her insidious wiles that she owed the loss of her daughter. But if the Demeter of the hymn cannot have been a personification of the earth, the only alternative apparently is to conclude that she was a personification of the corn. 5

The conclusion is confirmed by the monuments; for in ancient art Demeter and Persephone are alike characterised as goddesses of the corn by the crowns of corn which they wear on their heads and by the stalks of corn which they hold in their hands. Again, it was Demeter who first revealed to the Athenians the secret of the corn and diffused the beneficent discovery far and wide through the agency of Triptolemus, whom she sent forth as an itinerant missionary to communicate the boon to all mankind. On monuments of art, especially in vase-paintings, he is constantly represented

along with Demeter in this capacity, holding corn-stalks in his hand and sitting in his car, which is sometimes winged and sometimes drawn by dragons, and from which he is said to have sowed the seed down on the whole world as he sped through the air. In gratitude for the priceless boon many Greek cities long continued to send the first-fruits of their barley and wheat harvests as thank-offerings to the Two Goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, at Eleusis, where subterranean granaries were built to store the overflowing contributions. Theocritus tells how in the island of Cos, in the sweet-scented summer time, the farmer brought the first-fruits of the harvest to Demeter who had filled his threshing-floor with barley, and whose rustic image held sheaves and poppies in her hands. Many of the epithets bestowed by the ancients on Demeter mark her intimate association with the corn in the clearest manner. 6

How deeply implanted in the mind of the ancient Greeks was this faith in Demeter as goddess of the corn may be judged by the circumstance that the faith actually persisted among their Christian descendants at her old sanctuary of Eleusis down to the beginning of the nineteenth century. For when the English traveller Dodwell revisited Eleusis, the inhabitants lamented to him the loss of a colossal image of Demeter, which was carried off by Clarke in 1802 and presented to the University of Cambridge, where it still remains. —In my first journey to Greece,|| says Dodwell, —this protecting deity was in its full glory, situated in the centre of a threshing-floor, amongst the ruins of her temple. The villagers were impressed with a persuasion that their rich harvests were the effect of her bounty, and since her removal, their abundance, as they assured me, has disappeared.|| Thus we see the Corn Goddess Demeter standing on the threshing-floor of Eleusis and dispensing corn to her worshippers in the nineteenth century of the Christian era, precisely as her image stood and dispensed corn to her worshippers on the threshing-floor of Cos in the days of Theocritus. And just as the people of Eleusis in the nineteenth century attributed the diminution of their harvests to the loss of the image of Demeter, so in antiquity the Sicilians, a corn-growing people devoted to the worship of the two Corn Goddesses, lamented that the crops of many towns had perished because the unscrupulous Roman governor Verres had impiously carried off the image of Demeter from her famous temple at Henna. Could we ask for a clearer proof that Demeter was indeed the goddess of the corn than this belief, held by the Greeks down to modern times, that the corn-crops depended on her presence and bounty and perished when her image was removed? 7

On the whole, then, if, ignoring theories, we adhere to the evidence of the ancients themselves in regard to the rites of Eleusis, we shall probably incline to agree with the most learned of ancient antiquaries, the Roman Varro, who, to quote Augustine's report of his opinion, —interpreted the whole of the Eleusinian mysteries as relating to the corn which Ceres (Demeter) had discovered, and to Proserpine (Persephone), whom Pluto had carried off from her. And Proserpine herself he said, signifies the fecundity of the seeds, the failure of which at a certain time had caused the earth to mourn for barrenness, and therefore had given rise to the opinion that the daughter of Ceres, that is, fecundity itself, had been ravished by Pluto and detained in the nether world; and when the dearth had been publicly mourned and fecundity had returned once more, there was gladness at the return of Proserpine and solemn rites were instituted accordingly. After that he says,|| continues Augustine, reporting Varro, —that many things were taught in her mysteries which had no reference but to the discovery of the corn.|| 8

Thus far I have for the most part assumed an identity of nature between Demeter and Persephone, the divine mother and daughter personifying the corn in its double aspect of the seed-corn of last year and the ripe ears of this, and this view of the substantial unity of mother and daughter is borne out by their portraits in Greek art, which are often so alike as to be indistinguishable. Such a close

resemblance between the artistic types of Demeter and Persephone militates decidedly against the view that the two goddesses are mythical embodiments of two things so different and so easily distinguishable from each other as the earth and the vegetation which springs from it. Had Greek artists accepted that view of Demeter and Persephone, they could surely have devised types of them which would have brought out the deep distinction between the goddesses. And if Demeter did not personify the earth, can there be any reasonable doubt that, like her daughter, she personified the corn which was so commonly called by her name from the time of Homer downwards? The essential identity of mother and daughter is suggested, not only by the close resemblance of their artistic types, but also by the official title of —the Two Goddesses— which was regularly applied to them in the great sanctuary at Eleusis without any specification of their individual attributes and titles, as if their separate individualities had almost merged in a single divine substance. 9

Surveying the evidence as a whole, we are fairly entitled to conclude that in the mind of the ordinary Greek the two goddesses were essentially personifications of the corn, and that in this germ the whole efflorescence of their religion finds implicitly its explanation. But to maintain this is not to deny that in the long course of religious evolution high moral and spiritual conceptions were grafted on this simple original stock and blossomed out into fairer flowers than the bloom of the barley and the wheat. Above all, the thought of the seed buried in the earth in order to spring up to new and higher life readily suggested a comparison with human destiny, and strengthened the hope that for man too the grave may be but the beginning of a better and happier existence in some brighter world unknown. This simple and natural reflection seems perfectly sufficient to explain the association of the Corn Goddess at Eleusis with the mystery of death and the hope of a blissful immortality. For that the ancients regarded initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries as a key to unlock the gates of Paradise appears to be proved by the allusions which well-informed writers among them drop to the happiness in store for the initiated hereafter. No doubt it is easy for us to discern the flimsiness of the logical foundation on which such high hopes were built. But drowning men clutch at straws, and we need not wonder that the Greeks, like ourselves, with death before them and a great love of life in their hearts, should not have stopped to weigh with too nice a hand the arguments that told for and against the prospect of human immortality. The reasoning that satisfied Saint Paul and has brought comfort to untold thousands of sorrowing Christians, standing by the deathbed or the open grave of their loved ones, was good enough to pass muster with ancient pagans, when they too bowed their heads under the burden of grief, and, with the taper of life burning low in the socket, looked forward into the darkness of the unknown. Therefore we do no indignity to the myth of Demeter and Persephone - one of the few myths in which the sunshine and clarity of the Greek genius are crossed by the shadow and mystery of death - when we trace its origin to some of the most familiar, yet eternally affecting aspects of nature, to the melancholy gloom and decay of autumn and to the freshness, the brightness, and the verdure of spring. 10

Chapter 45. The Corn-Mother and the Corn-Maiden in Northern Europe.

IT has been argued by W. Mannhardt that the first part of Demeter's name is derived from an alleged Cretan word *deai*, —barley, and that accordingly Demeter means neither more nor less than —Barley-mother or —Corn-mother; for the root of the word seems to have been applied to different kinds of grain by different branches of the Aryans. As Crete appears to have been one of the most ancient seats of the worship of Demeter, it would not be surprising if her name were of Cretan